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ABSTRACT

The typical school system lacks an adequate support system for helping teachers resolve student problems. This paper describes one organizational innovation, the intervention assistance team (IAT), which is a formal group of teachers and other educational personnel who meet at the building level to recommend solutions to specific instructional problems. Guidelines are offered for team composition, the referral procedure, and scheduling. The team provides the following benefits: (1) a means for the school district to meet Ohio's accountability standards; (2) timely intervention for students; (3) a means for meeting the state requirement for identifying handicapped children; (4) support and staff-development opportunities to teachers and principals; (5) participative decision-making opportunities; and (6) opportunities for enhancing the principal's instructional-leadership role. A checklist of questions to consider prior to adoption and a list of guidelines for conducting IAT meetings are included. (Contains seven references.) (LMI)

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Solving Student Problems with the IAT:

A Primer for the Principal

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Introduction

The teacher that observes a student having great problems academically or socially ordinarily has few alternatives. This situation is partly explained when the working conditions of teachers are examined. Isolation in teaching and the related problems of privatism and lack of social interaction combine to deter teachers from seeking help from others (Sergiovanni, 1987, p. 241). A favored approach is to recommend the student for diagnosis to determine eligibility for special education services. If the child meets the guidelines for special education placement, the teacher may become entirely unburdened of what had formerly appeared to be a daunting problem. Conversely, the result may be that the student is declared ineligible; responsibility for the problem remains with the teacher.

Although the prospects for assistance are less certain than the special education referral, the principal represents a remaining source of aid. Seeking the principal's assistance, however, entails a risk. Teachers, and particularly new teachers, are often hesitant to report problems that might lead to the suggestion that their ability to meet the responsibilities of the classroom is inadequate.

When a teacher does seek assistance from the principal, moreover, the outlook for resolving the problem depends almost solely on the expertise of one individual. A single principal is not likely to be able to generate acceptable solutions to the entire range of insoluble classroom problems. The typical school system, then, has an inadequate support system for assisting teachers in

resolving student problems. An organizational innovation that can provide a way out of this dilemma is the intervention assistance team (IAT).

Definition

An IAT is usually a formal group of teachers and other educational personnel that meets at the building level to recommend solutions to specific instructional problems. Structures and processes similar to the IAT are also referred to as building-level assistance teams, building-level teams, teacher-assistance teams, instructional assistance teams, or pupil service teams.

Most often, but not always, problems considered by an IAT concern the learning difficulties of a single student. Classroom teachers, school psychologists, guidance counselors, special education teachers, and the building principal all have special training and expertise that can be profitably focused on a given problem at the same time. The organizational structure of the IAT makes it possible to bring the special knowledge present in the building to bear on the problem simultaneously. An IAT enlists building-level professionals in a collaborative attempt to arrive sat an appropriate intervention.

IATs may be identified as conventional, expanded, or adapted. The conventional IAT attempts to provide recommendations for solving the academic or behavioral problems of individual students based on referrals from classroom teachers. An expanded IAT is more liberal both in the kinds of issues accepted and in who may make referrals. The nature of questions referred to the IAT can be broadened to encompass any problem relating to the growth and development of the student. Likewise, the set of individuals able to refer problems to the IAT can be expanded to include students, teachers, special

educational personnel, administrators, parents, or others concerned about the success of the child. An adapted IAT, more often known by another name, uses a similar structure to resolve other kinds of issues and problems at the building level. Graebner and Dobbs (1984) report a Teacher Assistance Team in operation at a junior high school that provides confidential assistance on primarily discipline-related cases referred by teachers. Except where otherwise indicated, the reader may assume that the use of the acronym IAT throughout the remainder of this paper refers to a conventional IAT.

Team Composition

Bearing in mind that some of the personnel in a given building may be perceived as more or less expert than others, the selection of the team membership is important. The principal should consider selecting one or several of the following for their special training and experience: school psychologist, guidance counselor, teacher of developmentally handicapped, teacher of learning disabilities, curriculum supervisor, or special education teacher. The building principal will typically serve as chair, and one or more classroom teachers may also be selected to join this group to form the core team.

In addition, the referring teacher becomes a part of the team as the teacher's referral is processed. Other temporary members may be invited from a group of building personnel who are thought to have special knowledge or insight into the referred problem. The additional members may be regular classroom teachers, speech and hearing specialists, Chapter 1 teachers, gifted coordinators, or medical personnel.

Building personnel may be motivated to serve as core members for a variety of reasons. Recognition for membership and participation might fulfill an individual's needs for belonging, status, and achievement. More tangible rewards in the form of release from teaching and other duties or, perhaps, a small stipend can be made available.

In some circumstances, an invitation to serve on the IAT may not be greeted with enthusiasm. The desirability of being selected may be outweighed by other factors. In a politicized building atmosphere, a teacher may view acceptance or rejection of team membership as supporting or rejecting the principal or some other party, and, as a consequence, may be reluctant to serve. There are other reasons membership may be refused. Some may not possess a sufficiently high level of commitment to devote the time required to be a productive IAT member, while others may not believe they have enough expertise.

Instead of the principal, the school psychologist or guidance counselor may provide the impetus for establishment of the IAT, then later became a member of the core team. In other schools, the collective bargaining agreement may control the identification of one or more of the team members. For example, in the Toledo Public School District, the teachers' union building representative is a permanent member of the core team. However the team may be constituted, membership is fixed for an indefinite period for some and is temporary for others. The IAT will usually, then, have a permanent set of members who are involved in all of the referrals. For a particular referral, this

group is joined by the referring teacher and others whom the principal believes will able be to make a useful contribution.

It is unrealistic to expect team members to begin functioning at a reasonable level of effectiveness without preparation for their new roles. The team should have an understanding of the IAT process and a system of organizing and sharing information on referred problems (McGlothlin, 1981). If an effective team is desired, training should be provided to team members.

Referral Procedure

The process usually begins after a classroom teacher becomes aware of a student's learning or behavioral problem, attempts to resolve the problem, and reaches an impasse. Then the teacher completes an IAT referral form or, in some cases, confers with the principal prior to completing the form.

In general terms, the process consists of gathering further information about the student, distributing what is known about the case to the team members, meeting, and recommending a course of action. The principal or the team may, of course, recommend a multifactored, multidisciplinary evaluation (MFE) for the student (Ohio Department of Education, 1982). When and how this decision is made accounts for the major variability in the conventional IAT model. In some buildings, the principal decides whether to refer the student for an MFE after a review of the case data with the referring teacher or the school psychologist. In other buildings, the decision that the student be recommended for an MFE is made by the team at the conclusion of the team meeting.

Prior to the IAT meeting, an attempt is made to collect information about the student that will be useful to the team. Only existing information and data

from routine observations (for example: test results, attendance records, and informal teacher assessments) can be gathered for the team. Pertinent information is duplicated and provided to each of the team members. Although the results of psychological testing would be useful to the team, such tests can not be administered. Such action could be seen as an attempt to circumvent the due process requirements associated with the MFE (Johnson, 1986, chap.4). The IAT process can not be used as a substitute for the MFE.

Scheduling

The IAT meeting is scheduled by the principal or a designee. While it appears most IAT meetings are held before school, IAT meetings are also held after school and during the school day. The best time depends upon local conditions, such as the availability of the team members and, possibly, restrictions imposed by the collective bargaining agreement. One district, Springfield Local, solves the problem of finding meeting time by hiring a substitute for each team member for an entire day once each month.

Whenever the meeting is held, time is usually limited. IAT meetings are normally in addition to the regular workday. Careful planning and thorough preparation can insure that meetings rarely exceed the minimum time required for the task. Principals have attempted to reduce the time required to hold the meeting by providing team members with a thorough description of the problem and all of the relevant information in advance of the meeting, communicating the expectation that the team members should have grasped the essentials of the problem prior to meeting, and limiting the meeting time to fifteen minutes or some other fraction of an hour.

Benefits

Responsibility and the Minimum Standards

The accountability movement gave rise in Ohio to mandated intervention for students who were not achieving satisfactorily. An IAT provides a means for the district to meet Ohio standards for intervention. The Ohio State Board of Education adopted minimum standards for elementary and secondary schools in 1982. The standards state that pupil performance objectives shall be established for English composition, mathematics, and reading. Furthermore, intervention shall be provided according to pupil needs.

According to the Ohio Department of Education (1983) "The teacher is the principal person involved in identifying the need for intervention, in designing the instructional form it will take, and in implementing the actions to be taken" (Ohio Department of Education, 1983, p.3). The building principal or administrator is described as being "responsible for seeing that evaluation occurs within the competency based curriculum and that subsequent instructional actions are taken with those students for whom intervention is necessary."

Students and the Need for Intervention

To use one example, consider the case of the student who appears to be falling behind the other students in reading midway through the term. All too often, the student who falls behind in reading is at a disadvantage at the start of the following term. The deficit is compounded as the student advances through the years. This growing deficit becomes increasingly difficult to

overcome. Timely intervention has the potential to mitigate the problem by bringing resources to bear when the deficit is first observed.

Intervention is simply an alternative or supplemental action designed to assist the student in overcoming an educational problem. Without an IAT or similar process in the building, the design of an intervention for regular education students with learning or behavioral problems is limited, for the most part, by the individual teacher's knowledge and skill. If the classroom teacher can identify a specific problem, the IAT can assist the teacher in designing and planning an intervention to resolve it.

In-School Identification of Handicapped Children

Each school district in Ohio is required to have a system for identifying handicapped children who are in school and may be in need of special education services pursuant to PL 94-142 and the Ohio Revised Code (Ohio Department of Education, 1983). To satisfy this requirement, the IAT can be used as a prereferral screening system. Considering the time and expense associated with MFEs, the need for careful identification is evident. An estimate of the need for screening can be gathered from a recent comment by the Director of Special Education in Ohio, Dr. Frank New, who remarked that half of the special education referrals were inappropriate. Neither the special education system nor the regular education system adequately serve students who narrowly miss qualifying for special education services or have more mundane problems, such as failing to complete assigned homework.

Teachers

Most of what has been discussed above concerning benefits to students applies to teachers, as well. Not only are teachers given support in meeting the responsibility for intervention, the operation of the IAT can take the form of ongoing staff development. Recommendations for providing intervention not only help teachers develop the means to overcome student difficulties, but potentially contribute to a sense of security and provide important feedback to teachers.

School buildings have been accurately described as a set of one-room schoolhouses connected by a common corridor to a cafeteria and gymnasium. The isolation of teachers from other professionals throughout the working day is a formidable obstacle to collaboration and group problem-solving. When an IAT is in use, the teacher who refers a problem to the team is supported by the collective expertise of some of the most knowledgeable educators in the building. The sense of shared responsibility inherent in the model has the potential to significantly alter the climate of the building.

Typically, teachers have limited bases for assessing the relative merit of their instructional decision-making. By contrast, teachers who participate in IAT meetings gain valuable feedback about the value of their own intervention tactics. Interventions emanating from the IAT give teachers a benchmark for comparing the quality of interventions they have arrived at independently of the team.

Principals

What benefits students and teachers also serves as a boon for the principal. Another important product of the IAT process is the desirable documentation of efforts to identify and assist with student problems. Moreover, the IAT can contribute to the professional development of the principal and clarify the perception of the principal as instructional leader.

Professional Development

The dated notion of the principal as master teacher is simply not practical. The contemporary principal is simply unable to possess greater expertise than all of the teachers and area specialists in the building. Even in areas where the principal is clearly more expert, the more effective course of action may not always be to prescribe or dictate remedies.

While it is evident that principals are customarily urged to use a participative management style, it is less clear as to how to proceed. Like the teacher who is suddenly immersed into the intricacies of the situation, so is the beginning principal often abruptly thrust into "a setting of immediacy" (Blumberg & Greenfield, 1986, pp. 171-2). Opportunities to involve teachers in decision making and planning do not always emphatically present themselves.

The quality circle is a popular means of organizing the talents and energy of group members to discover and unravel problems of coordination and productivity (Ouchi, 1982). Other structures such as employee councils and advisory groups have also been effectively used to involve workers. While these structures can be effectively employed to involve teachers and other staff members in schooling issues, all are borrowed from other organizational

settings. Training may be a problem, the objectives of these groups tend to be diffuse, and each of the organizational structures must be adapted to fit the educational setting. Dividends to the organization are delayed while the participants learn new roles and discover how to function constructively as a group.

Although the study of participative management theory has established a favorable disposition toward establishing groups, the daily exigencies of schooling displace the time needed to plan and create an appropriate structure for the unique circumstances found in school buildings. The IAT developed in response to the need to better orchestrate the talent and skill present at the building level to the end of serving children's educational needs more fully.

The knowledge and skill acquired from experience with the IAT can be applied to other situations. The underlying structure of the IAT model can be modified and used when staff involvement and collaboration are desired.

Instructional Leadership

An opportunity is provided for the principal to visibly support a process that exists primarily to assist teachers in solving instructional problems. Not only do teachers usually work in isolation from one another, but teachers are often oblivious of the extent of the instructional support role played by the principal. The role outlined for the principal in the IAT process makes his or her supporting activity evident. The IAT provides excellent opportunities to the principal and staff to express, discuss, and reinforce mutually held values and goals.

Many principals, when asked to compare their former role as a teacher with their present one, express regret over their diminished involvement with students. Some principals lament the few opportunities to effect improvements in educational outcomes for individual students. Development and implementation of the IAT should be particularly gratifying to principals who perceive themselves as solvers of instructional problems.

Summary

The primary purpose of the IAT is to provide support to the classroom teacher in overcoming academic and social difficulties experienced by students. Assistance with problems in other areas of school operations can be contributed by the IAT or similar building-level teams. The IAT can serve as a model for other group work in the school. A team with a broader mission could be the primary means of providing instructional supervisory support to individual teachers (Sgan & Clark, 1986). Another example of a teacher assistance team is reported by Graebner & Dobbs (1984), who describe the team as helping teachers who may be on the verge of burning out.

The procedure for using the IAT is clearly described, and can easily be adapted for use in differing circumstances when the principal seeks to involve the group. The IAT can help adults who want students to achieve success. What will be accomplished depends on the motivation and expertise of the individuals comprising the IAT.

Checklist Before Adoption

_____ Has the principal made an assessment of his or her group leadership skills that will be needed to work collaboratively with teachers and others?

_____ Has provision been made for any special training needed to prepare the faculty for participation? Have classroom teachers and special services personnel both been adequately prepared for their new roles?

_____ Do the prospective team members have sufficient ownership, commitment, and expertise to participate effectively? Can any incentives be provided for participation (e.g., recognition, release from teaching, etc.)?

_____ Does the building staff believe that altering factors present in the interaction between the student and the classroom environment (e.g., instructional strategies, curriculum, and student opportunities to learn) will help students succeed in the regular classroom?

_____ Is there an indication of the willingness of the staff to make referrals and serve if invited?

_____ Has a clear distinction been made between special education and IAT referral processes?

_____ Are the necessary resources available for the continuation of the IAT?

_____ Does the principal have authority to proceed?

Meeting Mechanics

- Provide the case materials and notice of the time, date, and place of the meeting sufficiently in advance.
- Begin and end the meeting promptly.
- Develop the procedures for the meeting collaboratively and follow them. Insure that new and temporary members understand how the meeting will proceed, too.
- Keep the team members on task.
- Provide a comfortable meeting area free from distractions.
- See that salient aspects of the meeting are recorded.
- Promote contributions from all members of the group by using active listening and other encouraging behaviors.
- Effective groups learn to manage their own behavior. Help the team learn to accept responsibility for their performance.

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